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Wolfgang Funk, The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium

Rachele Dini

1 In *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium,* Wolfgang Funkreads the literary landscape after postmodernism through the interrelated concepts of authenticity, meta-reference and reconstruction. These terms, he argues, can help make sense of how fiction post-1990 has "renegotiate[d] the relationship between experience and its representation in an attempt to truthfully re-enact experience *through* representation" (1, emphasis added). Funk is thus concerned to both articulate the difference between past and present modes of representing the authentic, and to shed light, through these readings, on changes in the cultural conceptualization and experience of selfhood, truth, and reality. Moving beyond such terms as "metamodernism," and "digimodernism," whose shared semantic root with modernism implies less of a break than an ill-defined continuation, and whose emphasis on specific constitutive elements risks obscuring the complexity of their interdependence, Funk instead argues the fruitfulness of attending to the interrelation in contemporary writing between self-referentiality, a search for the real, and the reconstruction of meaning through these.

2 Funk uses Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* Jasper Fforde's *Thursday-next* series, and Julian Barnes' *England, England* and *The Sense of an Ending* as case studies. These works stand out in their efforts to find and register the authentic in a culture in which both self-referentiality and the notion of the "real" and "true" have themselves been commodified, and

indeed spawned industries of their own (self-help being the paradigmatic example). They differ, moreover, from what he terms the "weaker" forms of self-reference of both the early novel (*Tristram Shandy, Don Quixote*) and postmodern fiction, insofar as they "pose an irresolvable epistemological or ontological challenge to the reader" that "cannot be resolved on the textual level," therefore necessitating "the imaginative reconstruction of the act of literary communication" (79). Contemporary literature engages with both the ambiguity of authenticity—a term characterized by its "terminological undecidability" (6)—and the paradox inherent to the very idea of authentic representation. The search for authenticity manifests itself at the formal level in textual meta-reference, which "tangl[es] and invalidat[es] traditional hierarchies within a given text, to generate ontological and epistemological paradoxes that are irresolvable within the logic of the text itself"—thus requiring a reconstructive effort on the part of the reader (6). It is this reconstructive effort that produces the text's "authenticity effect" (6). Paradoxically then, while authenticity eludes representation, it is in fact revealed most clearly *through* its representation. It logically follows that contemporary efforts to represent the authentic, however partial and incomplete they may be, can tell us a great deal about our own sense of the "real." In Funk's words, if we assume that "experience (life) and representation (art) touch in the infinitude of paradox, the ontological and epistemological ambiguity generated by meta-reference provides an appropriate formal instrument to investigate this infinitude" (17).

3 But perhaps the book's most arresting feature is its incitation to circumvent authenticity's maddening evasiveness by treating it as a "black box." Mathematician René Thom's described the "black box" as any system that can only be known "through its explicit interaction with the external world realized by the inputs and outputs of the system" (Thom, as cited by Funk, 55). The only way to unveil the black box, Thom argued, was to "play with it." Building on this notion, Funk suggests we get to know authenticity (so to speak) by the outcomes or representations it engenders: "by investigating how it impinges on concepts with which it comes into contact" and assuming it to be a "catalyst which collapses what are traditionally considered to be binary oppositions" (56). Such an approach allows us, too, to see beyond dichotomies such as essence/performance; reality/fiction; authorship/reception; and, indeed, aesthetics/ethics, and to recognize the ways in which these often co-exist. Among the book's greatest strengths is its thoughtful articulation of the role that the categories of authenticity and meta-reference and the reconstructive efforts to which they give fruit can play in understanding our present moment. In this sense, it, too, points outwards, inviting us to "reconstruct" our own meaning from beyond its covers.

4 There are also, however, certain problematic aspects. First among these is the breadth of space Funk devotes to the philosophical concepts, methodology, and overview of others' approaches to the defining authenticity and meta-fiction (over 100 pages), as opposed to actually

analyzing literary texts (86). This is to an extent understandable, considering the sheer number of ideas discussed, the book's interdisciplinary scope, and its implicit aims to formulate new ways of reading. By comparison though the literary case studies that follow feel brief, and at times even superficial, and I personally was left wishing for more. In particular, the discussions of authenticity, materiality and memory in relation to *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (174-177) lack any reference to or discussion of scholarship in this area, which is a shame, as attention to the wealth of work on objects, waste and modes of experiencing the past would have added to and complicated Funk's analyses in significant ways.

5 A second, related, concern is the relative paucity of authors discussed (four), the focus on multiple books by the same authors, and the palpable absence of Don DeLillo, J.M. Coetzee, and Amélie Nothomb, to name but a few writers whose postmillennial style has changed noticeably to grapple with precisely the concerns outlined by Funk. The absence of David Foster Wallace's writing from the discussion is also regrettable. Funk does justify this, but in light of his own description of Wallace's career as "a quest for literary sincerity," his claim to be looking to "widen the net" to include "less immediately obvious" writers (76) does not entirely convince. Inclusion of a wider range of writers, and more time spent discussing them, would have strengthened the book as a whole. As it stands, the title feels somewhat misleading, as what follows is not so much a work of literary criticism than of theory, and not so much a study of authenticity in contemporary literature than of the tenets by which we define the very concepts of authenticity and selfhood, and a meditation on how these play out on the cultural stage. There is nothing wrong in any of this—and I hasten to emphasize that it makes for an absorbing read—but it is not what the title promises.

6 These comments however do not overly detract from the strength of the work as a whole. The ideas Funk puts forth in *The Literature of Reconstruction* have obvious, and exciting, applications both for literary studies and the humanities as a whole. Interlacing ideas from a staggering array of thinkers from the humanities and beyond, and providing, too, an eloquent overview of the evolution of the concepts of selfhood and authenticity from Ancient Greece to the present, Funk offers a compelling framework for reading literature in the digital, neoliberal era, and, by extension, culture at large. And this, regardless of the above, is an impressive feat.

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